

Grizzly Bear (Threatened)

Habitat

Grizzly bears excavate dens as early as September or prior to entry in November. Dens are usually dug on steep slopes where wind and topography cause an accumulation of deep snow and where snow is unlikely to melt during warm periods. Dens are generally found at high elevations well away from human development (USDI 1993). Once they've emerged, grizzly bears use a variety of habitats. Key spring bear habitat is associated with lower elevation mesic forested and open habitats that afford fresh green-up of grasses, roots, and bulbs as well as foraging opportunities for small rodents. This may include riparian areas, meadows and open grassy parklands, and avalanche chutes. Big-game winter ranges and spring calving/fawning areas are often located at lower elevations and warmer aspects, too, and provide additional opportunities for scavenging winter-kill carcasses and elk calf/deer fawn depredation during the spring season. Summer and fall habitats are associated with mid- to high-elevation mesic habitat. Aspect (east, west and south-facing) and lower elevations help differentiate spring habitat from summer and fall seasonal habitats. Fall grizzly bear habitat is characterized by mid- and high elevation use of huckleberry (and other berry) shrub fields (often associated with old wildfire burns), riparian areas, slabrock/avalanched chutes, open meadows and grassy parklands, and whitebark pine stands.

Population Status and Trend

Grizzly bears were listed as Threatened in 1975 and populations in the lower-48 States have significantly expanded since the time of listing. Currently, grizzly bears primarily exist in four ecosystems: The Northern Continental Divide (NCDE), Greater Yellowstone (GYE), Cabinet-Yaak (CYE), and Selkirk (SE) ecosystems. There are no known populations in the North Cascades and Bitterroot (BE) ecosystems and no known populations outside these defined ecosystems, although there have been documented single dispersing bears outside these ecosystems.

Observations and Surveys

Melquist (1985) conducted a survey on the Clearwater NF using ground and aerial surveys, grizzly bear observations, and compiling 88 reports of grizzly bears between 1900 and 1984. No signs of bears were found during aerial or ground surveys. No verifiable observations were reported. Of the 88 reports there were 2 confirmed, one from around Grangemont in 1909 and one along Colt Killed Creek near Powell (1956) however the 1956 observation was subsequently determined to not be a grizzly bear. Groves (1987) compiled and reviewed 175 historical grizzly bear reports from central and Northern Idaho including 77 reports from within the Bitterroot Grizzly Bear Recovery Area including all National Forests except the Sawtooth and Bitterroot. Most of the reports (62) came from the Clearwater NF. Groves did not document any additional evidence that for confirming any of the reports. Servheen et al. (1990) and Kunkel et al. (1991) surveyed for grizzly bears during two summers in the Upper North Fork using remote cameras. No photos of grizzly bears were recorded however the small area and low camera densities were cited as a reason to caution against confirming the absence of bears. In 2007 a young male grizzly was mistakenly killed in the Kelly Forks area in the North Fork. As a result, Servheen and Schumaker (2010) conducted a camera and DNA survey of the Bitterroot Mountains. No grizzlies were detected during either the 2008 or 2009 surveys.

In 2019 two grizzly bears were confirmed on the Forest. Both bears were males that had dispersed from the Cabinet Mountains of northwest Montana/northern Idaho. One of the bears spent most of the summer/fall period along the Montana/Idaho line around Lolo Pass, Colt Killed/Brushy Fork Creek areas, and into the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness prior to returning to northwest Montana to den. To date, this bear has remains in Northwest Montana. The second bear observation, from the White Bird area, was confirmed to be a grizzly bear through DNA. The sample matched that of a male bear collared as a yearling in the Cabinet Mountains of north Idaho in 2016. The collar dropped off in 2018 and this bear was unaccounted for until 2019. The Idaho Department of Fish and Game issued a press release in April

of 2020 that a Fish and Game officer had that confirmed grizzly bear tracks at the Fish Creek Meadows winter recreation area. This is presumed to be the same bear from 2019 because of its proximity to that observation. There have been no confirmed follow-up observations of this bear and the current location is unknown.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service updated procedures for mapping where grizzly bears “May Be Present” in December of 2020 based on these, and other recent confirmed observations of grizzly bears. As a result of this the Hungry Ridge Project now overlaps with an area identified as where grizzly bears “May Be Present”. The description of ‘May Be Present’ for project planning purposes does not mean those locations are considered ‘occupied range’ (areas in which grizzly bears have established home ranges and continuously reside). Nor does a ‘May Be Present’ designation equate to effects determinations of may affect or likely to adversely affect. When utilizing the grizzly bear mapping methodology, considerations the Level 1 Team may discuss include if available, but are not limited to: last known locations of verified bears (if telemetry collar data exists); sex and age class of bears, which may inform potential home range size; whether the bear is transitory or localized to a specific area; the suitability of the habitat within the action area; and whether HUCs adjacent to those within the action area should also be considered as areas where grizzly bears ‘May Be Present’. Given these considerations, although grizzly bear may show as ‘May Be Present’ through the mapping methodology, the Action Agencies may find that the proposed action will have no effect to grizzly bears.